

History 4: Session 2

France pre-revolution conditions, e.g. the Ancien Regime, absolutism, the Enlightenment. Causes of revolution.

The Nature of Ancien Regime France

The textbook (Miller) description of ancien regime is of a state typically in the period 1600-1800 which was:

1. Politically a monarchy.
2. Socially hierarchical and aristocratic with the vast majority of the population living as peasants with various degrees of restraint on their freedom.
3. Economically based on agricultural and followed mercantilist policies

France in the C18th fulfilled all these criteria.

The French Monarchy

France in the C18th could claim a monarchy that was amongst the oldest in Europe. The Bourbon Kings of France from Henry IV (crowned in 1594) could claim direct male lineage from Charlemagne and beyond through the Salic Law. The myth and tradition of great monarchs past was an important in underpinning the concept of The Divine Right of Kings by which French monarchs governed.

The idea that the Monarch had an absolute right to make law derived from God as he saw fit and that his subjects were as minors in a patriarchal family reached its apogee in the long reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715), the “Sun King”. Louis XIV reacted to the noble revolts of the fronde in his minority by imposing a strong centralised royal government on a troublesome traditionalist aristocracy (noblesse de épée). To sustain the royal bureaucracy he added to the other branch of the nobility, that which was based on the privileges of office (noblesse de robe).

Yet the centralisation of control and royal absolutism should not be exaggerated. First, France was a vast country in C18th terms. Without a modern transport infrastructure imposing centralised customs and practices was possible only in a limited way. In so far as it was achieved it was done by superimposing royal control on a pre-existing system of clientelism. In other words French governments in the C17th had managed to impose royal authority at the pinnacle of a complicated system of granting and diffusing privilege and wealth.

However, as you will read, the lack of attention to the boring chores of government by Louis XV (1715-1774) had gone some way to undermine the power of royal authority. This had to some extent also been undermined by the difficulties of controlling a bureaucracy that largely functioned based on the calculation of personal benefit by the office holder.

It has been argued that Louis XVI attempts to take a more active role in government compared with his father Louis XV was a contributory factor towards revolution. As we shall see the reforms of Louis XVI and his ministers such as Turgot, Calonne and Necker were “sufficient to whet the appetite of some, to irritate others and satisfy none.” (Rudé p.4)

Task 1. Using information and documents from: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/> (or from Mathews Chapter 1) write a brief description of Louis XVI. To what extent do you agree that he was responsible for the revolution?

A Hierarchical Peasant Society

France in the C18th was overwhelmingly a rural society. It was one experiencing population growth from around 21.5 million at the start of the C18th, to roughly 28 million in 1789 at the outbreak of revolution. The unfortunate factor in this population growth was that it came without a corresponding

modernisation of agriculture and increase in the food supply. Urban centres grew in importance in the C18th. However, only 2% of the French population lived in the capital Paris and this was by some way the largest urban centre.

George Rudé describes the society of France under the ancien regime as a pyramid: “whose apex was filled by the Court and aristocracy, its centre by the ‘middling classes’ or bourgeoisie, and its base by the ‘lower orders’ of peasants and urban tradesmen and craftsmen.” (Rudé p.1).

In this structure France was similar to most societies in Europe at the time. However, in the French case at least the social pyramid was characterised by both vertical and horizontal tensions.

The Peasantry

Making up the crushing majority of the population, the French peasant although typically free rather than a serf (about 1 in 20 were serfs), was weighed down by a heavy burden of taxation and dues. Peasants owned about a third of the land of France in the C18th, yet most of their holdings were small of poor quality and farmed by antiquated methods. Although about 1 in 4 peasants were owner occupiers, half were landless sharecroppers and either way the pressure of direct taxation, through the *taille*, the *vingtieme*, the church tithe and the capitation, and of indirect taxation e.g. the *gabelle* was large. Further, sharecroppers and tenants had to pay dues to their *seigneur*.

In most areas the burden of taxation and dues meant that the peasant existed on a rather small surplus and in years of poor harvest might fail to make ends meet. Hunger was a constant spectre for the peasant class in general and a constant reality for the rural poor. While peasant status varied from region to region as did the burden of taxation, the fact that most surplus production was removed by landowners had important consequences, especially in years of poor harvest. Between 1785 and 1789 wheat prices rose by 66%, rye by 71% and firewood by 91% , and in 1788 the harvest failed (Wright, p.8). At the time of the revolution the poorest subjects of the ancien regime were starving. Indeed a feature of the C18th was the growth of the subsistence troubles: 182 between 1690-1720, 652 between 1760-1789, with four great waves between 1700 and 1750 (1709-1710, 1725, 1738-41, 1748-49) and six between 1751 and 1789 (1752, 1768, 1770, 1775, 1784-85, 1788-1789).

Historians differ in their presentation of the peasantry of the ancien regime. Marxist historians tend to emphasise the unitary character of the peasant class, whereas non-Marxists tend to see peasant society as mirroring the hierarchy of society as a whole, emphasising the social and economic differences between the wealthy peasant owner or *coq du village* and the landless peasant or sharecropper.

The Urban “Working Class”

Just as rural France was an old fashioned peasant society, with most rural industry and manufacturing being based on the domestic system or small scale, then urban France was also pre-industrial in its nature. As Wright states. “Most towns were either agrarian market towns, great ports, or ecclesiastical and administrative centres”. Urban society was also hierarchical and the lower orders were made up of an artisan workforce and below them an unemployed or irregularly employed pauper population. According to Wright the population of C18th Paris was made up of c.120,000 nobles, clergy and bourgeois, over 500,000 “artisans, small shopkeepers and traders, wage-earners, clerks, journeymen and apprentices” (the future *sans culottes*), and at least 50,000 “casual labourers, domestic servants, footloose immigrants, unemployed and criminals”(Wright, p.8).

So there was no modern industrial working class, but rather workers in small-scale industry married to medieval practices and customs, but who nevertheless were to play an important part in the revolution, and whose hatred of privilege especially in times of hardship such as 1788-89 should not be underestimated. As Wright points out: “Workers spent something like half their income on bread in normal times, but up to 58 per cent in times of economic crisis and a disastrous 88-90 per cent in the near famine conditions of the midsummer of 1789” (Wright, p.14)

The Bourgeoisie

If historians disagree on the nature of the French peasantry under the ancien regime then even less agreement exists on the nature of the French “middle classes”, those who possessed education and wealth without noble status. Broadly in relation to the revolution, the traditional Marxist account has undergone revision in the face of research by non-Marxist historians who question the existence of a unified middle class.

1. The traditional Marxist account is that during the C18th the traditional structures of feudal society were increasingly untenable, because the nobility who held power were no longer the motor behind French economy and society. This had passed to a commercial middle class who increasingly resented the privileges of noble status and the barriers to capitalist enterprise that were incarnate in the government of the ancien regime.
2. The criticism of this view centres on the questions: Who were these new capitalists and did they constitute a coherent unit? Where were in the revolution? To what extent were they distinct from the nobility anyway? These criticisms centre on the lack of evidence of a separate commercial class in C18th France. The upper echelons of the middle class followed similar practices to the nobility and their wealth was also largely based on land.

Generally, the work of historians such as A. Cobban and F. Furet has led the textbook view of the nature of the bourgeois to be modified away from that of traditional Marxists such as G. Lefebvre and A. Soboul. We should recognise that in the C18th the broadening of the ranks of administrators, lawyers, landed and commercial elites led to an increased pressure for offices and privileges and therefore resentment on the part of those who failed to gain their slice of the pie. But, it is also important to note that in the C18th the middle class was difficult to recognise as a distinct unit from the nobility which it tried to emulate and compete with. The elite of the French middle classes often enjoyed the same privileges as those of noble birth. As Wright states:

“Both groups drew most of their income from landed wealth; both were involved in industrial and commercial investment. To rise from the ranks of the bourgeoisie was easy for those with money [through the purchase of a title]”. (Wright, p.11)

Perhaps it was the revolution that made the bourgeois rather than the other way around.

The Nobility

The French noble order in the C18th although claiming to be based on a system of medieval privileges and values was not a closed caste. The creation of new nobles during the C17th and C18th had greatly added to the ranks of those claiming noble status. Although the court nobility were a small group of c.4000, the nobility as a whole were a large and varied group to the extent that their numbers are in dispute:

“French nobles were a deeply divided and variegated group, numbering somewhere between 100,000 and 400,000. Between a quarter and a third were of recent origin – families ennobled since 1715. There was considerable antagonism between rich and poor nobles; Court and country nobles; even the Court nobility were split between rival cabals. Moreover, there was a significant minority of nobles who shared the values of the bourgeoisie, while some were prominent in French industry and finance. Their fiscal privileges and exemptions were considerable, although not so much as was once assumed. There were exempt from compulsory billeting, military service, the *corvée* (compulsory road work), the *gabelle* (salt tax) and *taille personnelle* (a poll tax); but were obliged to pay the *capitation* (a tax on overall revenues) and the *vingtième* (a 5 per cent tax on net landed revenue). Although their privileges were certainly worth possessing, the French nobility were probably the most highly -taxed in Europe” (Wright, p.11).

Tensions between the nobility and other parts of society in the C18th have led some historians to identify a “feudal reaction” in the late C18th. In terms of noble peasant relations, this was manifest through an attempt on the part of landlords to maintain revive and sometimes invent peasant obligations to their *seigneur*. Also, through the drive towards new agricultural techniques on the part of large landowners, such as enclosure, which encroached on traditional peasant rights. Whether the

countryside was experiencing a feudal reaction before 1789 or whether the pressure of new capitalist agricultural techniques was felt most acutely by the more vulnerable amongst the peasantry is in dispute, what we should note is that in their *cahiers de doléances* French peasants complained of a tightening of feudalism.

The term feudal reaction is also applied to noble bourgeois relations. Marxist historians point to the progressive restriction of offices to those of noble status in the last half of the C18th., whether in the army or civilian government. To quote J Godechot: “the more numerous, the wealthier and better educated the French bourgeoisie became, the scarcer became the number of governmental and administrative posts to which they could aspire” (Rudé, p.5)

Clearly by the Revolution other sections of French society had cause to resent the nobility, and the nobility were increasingly preoccupied with defending their privileges.

Concept of “Notables”

Contrasting with the C18th as a period of rivalry between a nascent bourgeoisie, a suppressed peasantry and a recalcitrant nobility is the view that there was considerable continuity between pre and post revolutionary France. One way of pinpointing continuity is by pointing out the similarities between Napoleon’s system of regional prefects and the system of regional intendants under the ancien regime. At a broader social level historians emphasise continuity by highlighting what they refer to as a fluid social group of notables. The notables were a new relatively unified elite of landowners who emerged during the C18th. The social antagonism between aristocrat and bourgeois of the revolution were the temporary result of political and financial crisis from 1786 onwards. The elite of notables was in the long term to consolidate itself during the revolutionary period, taking advantage of the purchase of confiscated church lands to increase its wealth and the abolition of privilege and purchased office to increase its power. (Wright, p.12)

The Enlightenment: Ideas to fuel a revolution?

The Enlightenment is the term given to a body of thinkers (and their work) who from the late C17th onwards began to apply secular and rational principles to their philosophical enquiry and by corollary to the institutions of society. In Europe as a whole one result of the Enlightenment was the practice of Enlightened Despotism (Miller, p. XXVIII).

In France it has been claimed that the ideas of the Enlightenment led to Revolution. This of course is not an easy claim to investigate given that the relation between ideas and practice is hardly ever straightforward. Especially as the philosophers of the French Enlightenment were no bourgeois revolutionaries, rather they were largely drawn from the nobility and if they were liberal in their thinking they were often conservative in practice. The mainstream of their thinking was focused on the need for more egalitarian organised and liberal government. As Sabine and Thorson point out:

“In general, all the French philosophers, except Rousseau, were more concerned with civil liberties, such as equality before the law and freedom of action, than they were with popular government” (Sabine and Thorson, p. 522).

Some of the main practical ideas of the Enlightenment as outlined by Godechot involved:

1. The necessity of a constitution. Whereas in Britain tradition combined with coded rights through instruments such as the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, in France arbitrary Royal government combined with feudalism had led to a complicated and contradictory system of laws and privileges. A rational constitution that set out clearly a system of rights and the limits of government was thus a major part of the work of French Enlightenment writers such as Montesquieu, who recommended a system of separation and balance of power, to guarantee liberty from arbitrary power.
2. Equality before the law. A French constitution should involve the right to fiscal equality and the abolition of serfdom and seigniorial privilege i.e. the abolition of feudalism. It should also involve the abolition of the exemptions from secular legal norms enjoyed by the clergy and

the magistracy in the *parlements* and a reduction in the power of the clergy. These points were in particular emphasised by Voltaire.

3. The physiocrats (who based their philosophy on the adoption of *laissez faire* economic principles) argued for the absolute need to get rid of internal tariffs and feudal subsistence based agricultural practices, through a constitution guaranteeing economic liberties.
4. Rousseau in his Social Contract argued for the equality of rights both in political terms and economic terms, thus freedom before the law should be accompanied by a redistribution of wealth and popular political participation.

In order to assess the role that the French Enlightenment played in generating revolution we need to take a look at how their ideas were spread and who read and used them. An increased literacy rate in 18th century France where about 50% of adult males were literate in 1780 was accompanied by a thriving publishing industry. Thus, the ideas of the Enlightenment reached a wider audience than merely the social elites although admittedly in a sometimes distorted manner. Significantly, the most literate areas of France the North- and East were strong supporters of revolution in 1789.

Further, the work of the American historian R. Darnton shows that the publishing industry did not merely disseminate the ideas of the mainstream philosophers but also was active in publishing politicised pornography which depicted Louis XVI as impotent and Marie-Antoinette as a nymphomaniac. These accounts did much to frame the popular image of the royal family and court.

Finally, the ideas of the Enlightenment were politicised and made into slogans in the years immediately preceding the revolution by their use by the *parlements* in their protests against royal reforms. Although more properly seen as the protector of privilege, between the 1760s and 1780s the regional *parlements* voiced their unwillingness to accept royal reform in terms of the rights of citizens and protection of the “rights of nation”, thus paving the way for a revolution in 1789 which self-consciously tried to base itself on rational ideas. (Wright, pp. 13-15).

Economic Problems and Political Crisis of Ancien Regime France under Louis XVI

Historians who focus on the long term causes of revolution have tended to focus on social tensions and the development of new ideas of rational government as the factors that underpinned the French Revolution. Those whose view of history leans more towards the Henry Ford conception of “one damn thing after another” focus on the particular configuration of crisis in the 1780s that led Nobles, Bourgeois and Plebs to revolt against the government in turn. Accordingly attention is paid to the immediate cause of the aristocratic revolt (1787-89) that led to the 1789 Revolution. This crisis was initially financial.

In 1786 the Comptroller General of Finance Calonne informed Louis XVI that government finances needed reform. The basic statistics were that with a revenue of 475 million *livres* there was an annual deficit of 100 million *livres*. About 50% of royal expenditure went towards servicing the existing debt. The origins of this situation were down to massive defence costs and poor taxation revenue; France had been involved in four wars in the last 50 years, the most recent being the American War of Independence.

Frankly, the taxation system in Ancien Regime France was a mess; taxation was heavy, regressive and inefficient. Indirect taxation was difficult to change due to a system of farming out its collection to rich financiers in return for fixed payments that could be altered only every six years. Calonne thus proposed a thorough going reform of direct taxation, involving further taxation and reduction of tax exemptions on the nobility, clergy and wealthier bourgeois. Given that the absolute nature of the French monarchy was more a matter of theory than practice and that its methods of financial administration were either archaic or non-existent (no central treasury to keep accounts existed), the proposal of such reforms was tantamount to proposing the complete reform of government.

The crown not having the practical power to force reform called an Assembly of Notables (a body which had not met since 1626) to ratify a reform programme, including a graduated land tax. The proposals were rejected by this Assembly due to the opposition of its clerical members who thought that the financial crisis was the fault of overspending and mismanagement of the part of the crown. Nobles, Clergy and Bourgeois alike now began to call for the forming of an Estates General a body,

which was felt to be a “National Assembly” grouping representatives from the three estates of the Ancien Regime, Nobles, Clergy and others the “Third Estate”. The Estates General had not met since 1614 and together with the rejection of Calonne’s reforms by the Assembly of Notables demands for its calling represent the beginning of the end for the Ancien Regime; summarised in the title the Noble Revolt 1787-89.

Thus for historians looking for more short term causes of the French Revolution the fact that reform proved impossible under Louis XVI without antagonising powerful vested interests, along with the misery of the general population when faced with failed harvests and rising bread prices, is the key to understanding the outbreak of Revolution in France

Causes of Revolution?

Task 2: From the above notes, the following source <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/> and further reading. Compile a brief account of the main underlying causes of the French Revolution.

Further Reading

D G Wright “Revolution and Terror in France 1789-1795” Seminar Studies Longman
 George Rudé “The French Revolution” Weidenfield and Nicolson
 R Mettam and D Johnson “French History and Society: The Wars of Religion to the Fifth Republic” Methuen
 Stuart T Miller “Mastering Modern European History” Palgrave Master Series 2nd Edition
 Hobsbawm E “Europe 1789-1848”

Other Sources Used in These Notes

J Godechot “Les Constitutions De La France Depuis 1789”
 Sabine and Thorson “A History of Political Theory” 4th Edition